

Shugenjas with Class

By Skip Williams



The shugenja offers a pleasant combination of exotic flavor and potent divine spellcasting. Furthermore, the broad options that the class offers allow you to create exactly the character you want. A shugenja can be an introspective scholar who specializes in unraveling tangled mysteries, or a gentle healer, or a flamboyant spellslinger, or some other archetype of your own design.

The Pros and Cons of a Shugenja

The shugenja's wide range of spells makes him among the most versatile spellcasters in the game.

Shugenja Assets

When you choose a shugenja, you gain access to a wide range of spells that are both powerful and useful. When chosen with care, a shugenja's spells can deal with nearly any challenge. However, the character also has a variety of other resources available. Below are several assets you have going for you when you play a shugenja.

- **Winning Ways:** A shugenja needs a high Charisma score because that ability governs his spellcasting, but it also gives him an edge in negotiations.
- **Good Will Saving Throws:** A shugenja uses the best save progression in the game for Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural mental strength helps him resist most effects that fool his mind or assault his spirit -- including charms, compulsions, illusions, *fear* effects, and even *inflict wounds* spells.
- **Spells:** The shugenja's spell list includes a wide variety of spells for attack, defense, utility, healing, and travel.
- **Spontaneous Spellcasting:** A shugenja doesn't have a spellbook; instead, he chooses a personal repertoire of spells that he can cast anytime. He does have a daily limit on the number of spells of each level he can cast, but he can freely cast any spell he knows until he reaches that limit. So he doesn't have to guess ahead of time which spells to prepare -- if he needs to cast a particular spell several times in the same day, he can do so.
- **Elemental Abilities:** Every spell on the shugenja's spell list is associated with an element (air, earth, fire, or water), even if it doesn't have an elemental descriptor. Upon creating a shugenja character, you must choose a favored element for him, and he gains the benefit of the Spell Focus feat when he casts a spell associated with that element. He also gains the spell-like ability to sense elements and locate their sources.
- **Good Skill Points:** At four skill points per level, the shugenja can gain ranks in a decent collection of skills. And if he has a good Intelligence score, he gains even more skill points.
- **Fair Weapon Selection:** The shugenja is proficient only with simple weaponry, plus the short sword. Though simple weapons aren't the most deadly ones available, the fact that the shugenja has access to the

whole category plus one martial weapon gives him lots of options, and that versatility can be a lifesaver if his spells happen to fail him.

Shugenja Weaknesses

As with any other character, the shugenja's advantages come at a price. Here are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a shugenja character.

- **Fairly Low Hit Points:** The shugenja's 6-sided Hit Dice give him a fairly good hit point total for a character with his spellcasting ability. However, he's still pretty vulnerable in a fight.
- **Poor Armor Class:** Because the shugenja has no proficiency with any kind of armor or shield, he generally has a low Armor Class. The combination of only fair hit points and low Armor Class makes him vulnerable in physical combat, especially melee. He can use spells and magic items to improve his defense, but doing so makes them less available for other purposes.
- **Poor Attack Bonus:** A shugenja's base attack bonus is +1 per two shugenja levels, which is the worst in the game. Some shugenjas can dish out lots of damage with their spells, but they don't do well with weapons.
- **Poor Reflex and Fortitude Saving Throws:** Shugenjas have the worst progression for Fortitude and Reflex saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Thus, they aren't so great at getting out of the way when the situation gets rough, nor can they withstand many assaults on their bodies.
- **Limited Spell Choices:** Once a shugenja chooses spells, his selection remains more or less fixed, except for new additions as he attains higher levels. He has a limited ability to change his repertoire, but for the most part, he is stuck with whatever spells he has chosen. In addition, he cannot choose spells associated with an element that opposes the one he favors. For example, if he has chosen fire as his element, he cannot use water spells. He must also choose an order, and that choice obliges him to select certain spells whenever he gains access to a higher spell level.

Playing a Classy Shugenja

Great shugenjas usually use the following techniques. So if you're playing one of these characters, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

Take Advantage of Your Versatility

You can use spells associated with only three elements, so choose your favored element wisely. More so than any other choice you make, this one shapes your personal repertoire of spells and thus your personal focus. Fire spells are good for attacking foes and damaging objects. Earth spells offer defense, personal enhancement, and a limited degree of mobility. Air spells provide greater mobility, information, and the ability to misdirect foes. Water spells offer healing and some divination abilities.

When you select spells for your repertoire, always look for those that offer maximum versatility. The *fire wings* spell, for example, turns your arms into fiery wings that allow you to fly or to burn objects and opponents.

On the other hand, spells aren't the only tool you have at your disposal. A few weapons, alchemical items, and other equipment can greatly expand your options.

Remember Your Friends

Even with your 6-sided Hit Dice, you're still among your party's most vulnerable members. So make sure you have a proper place in the party's marching order -- preferably in the middle, so that at least one ally always stands between you and your foes.

Your spells make you a force to be reckoned with, but you still can't afford to get cocky. A spell isn't always the best way to solve a problem; sometimes it's better to let other characters handle the situation. And be careful with your aim when you do cast a spell, or you may quickly become your party's worst enemy. Always be aware of how your actions may help or hinder your allies.

The Party's Front Line: Your party's heavily armored individuals (particularly fighters and paladins) form a fighting line that keeps enemies away from you, so be ready to support them with spells in case they get into trouble. But when casting your spells, be careful to aim them so that your friends aren't caught in their destructive effects. If you can cast earth or water spells, your party's fighter-types can become your best weapons, since you can use enhancing spells to augment their abilities or healing spells to keep them fighting.

Party Scouts: Mobile and stealthy characters such as rangers, rogues, and monks can ferret out enemies that you can defeat with your spells, so be ready to deal with whatever they uncover. But a scout may need support in a hurry, so pay attention to what she's doing. A timely fire spell can save her skin, and an air spell can improve her mobility or let someone else go quickly to her aid.

Other Spellcasters: You probably aren't the only spellcaster in your party, but you may well have the smallest selection of spells available to you on any given day. So try to make your fellow spellcasters aware of the spells you have so that they can make selections to cover the gaps in your capabilities. If your personal repertoire is primarily offensive, however, don't expect other spellcasters to let you have all the fun blasting the opposition. Instead, work out ways to coordinate your attack spells. Perhaps you and another spellcaster can work together to blanket the opposition with area spells, or perhaps one of you can use area spells while another uses targeted spells to take out the enemy leaders or pick off cripples.

Some Key Equipment

Your spells are more important to you than your gear. Nevertheless, a few pieces of the right equipment can make your career longer and happier.

- **Melee Weapon:** You're not much good in melee, but you never know when you'll have to resort to hand-to-hand combat. Thus, you should carry a good melee weapon so that you're not defenseless when your spells run out or fail. A spear deals good damage and can also prove useful in probing surfaces for unseen dangers. A longsword has reach and can help keep foes a little farther away from you. Finally, a short sword is a handy and effective light weapon that's worth having no matter what other melee weapons you might choose.
- **Ranged Weapon:** A crossbow can prove as effective as a low-level attack spell against some opponents. Use it when necessary to conserve your spells, or when the opposition isn't threatening enough to merit their use. You can use either a heavy or a light crossbow, as you choose. The former deals more damage but takes longer to reload. At the beginning of your career, the light crossbow might prove a better choice than the heavy one because you're more likely to find yourself out of other options. But as you gain experience (and money for better equipment), you might prefer to deal more damage with a single shot.

- **Backup Spells:** You never know when you'll run out of spells. Furthermore, you never know when you'll need a particular spell -- and need it very badly. So it pays to keep some spellcasting power in reserve via a collection of scrolls, wands, or both. Scrolls provide a great way to carry along useful spells that you might not use in every adventure, though you can use only scrolls that have spells associated with the elements to which you have access. Wands are useful for bread-and-butter spells that you use often, especially attack spells. Furthermore, both scrolls and wands let you use spells that you haven't included in your personal repertoire. If a spell is on the shugenja spell list, you can use it from a scroll or wand even if you don't know how to cast it yourself.
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About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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